

**Along Came a Spider:
Monogram's P-61 Black Widow
By Mark Soppet**



Black Widow—to most World War II enthusiasts, the name should bring to mind the largest piston-engined fighter of the war. Such a large airplane was needed to house the massive radar and the cannons which gave the P-61 supremacy over the night skies. In the eastern theater, the Black Widows pursued the buzz bombs. On the Pacific front, the Black Widow's mission was destroying Japanese bombers.

The first plastic model of the mighty P-61 was the 1/48th scale Monogram offering, originally released in 1974 and still available after numerous re-issues. Until AMTech announced their P-61 / F-15 family of kits in 2003, this was your only bet to build a Widow in 1/ 48 scale.

Back in 1974, Monogram was on the cutting edge of model airplane kits, and the P-61 was a shining example. Monogram gave model builders detailed cockpits, panels that could be displayed in open positions to show off the detail underneath, and the option to build several variants in the same kit. The P-61 embodied all of these features.

Construction begins with the cockpit. Painting the interior will make you lament Monogram's choice to mold the kit in black plastic. The parts are gloss black and covered with a fairly heavy amount of mold release. I had a hard time covering the cockpit with Polly Scale's acrylic interior green paint. If I were to do the kit again, I would have washed the trees in dish soap before starting, and then sprayed the interior parts with a coat of gray primer before brush-painting them green.



Nevertheless, Monogram does a great job of making the cockpit look "busy." They even provide a fire extinguisher, ammo belts for the cannons, a gunsight, and additional canisters in the cockpit area. The cockpit stringers are provided as separate sidewall pieces that glue onto the insides of the fuselage.

By the time you arrive at step 2 in the instructions, you must make a choice as to which aircraft you will build. The kit gives you an option to do a P-61A or P-61B. Also provided are the optional gun turret and mud guard for the nose gear. The turret was only fitted to a few P-61A's, but it was on the majority of P-61B's. Some of the aircraft without the rotating top turret were fitted with a fixed top turret, although this turret had a straight trailing edge instead of the rounded one on the rotating turret.

The instructions imply that olive drab P-61A's have a turret, the gloss black P-61A's don't, and the gloss black P-61B's do. This is not always true, and further research is needed based on the aircraft you want to build. The mud guard is also dependent on the particular airframe. I used mine, but I glued it on the strut in the opposite direction of what it should be.

Although Monogram gives you detailed guns to place inside the turret, this detail goes wasted because you cannot see them once the turret is glued on. With some modification, this model could also be built as a fixed-turret P-61. My suggestion at this stage is to find a particular aircraft that you want to depict and build the model to this specification.

Plenty of optional parts are provided to build the A or B variant. When it comes to the aircraft's radome, you can build a P-61A with a closed nose, a P-61A with an open nose, or a P-61B with a closed nose. The P-61B gets a longer nose piece, but Monogram only provides the radar set for the P-61A. I used the "B" nose, and jammed it full of lead shot to weight the plane down. The P-61 is very tail heavy and needs a lot of weight up front to ballast it. Monogram gives you a cheesy-looking

clear strut to put under the aircraft's aft fuselage to prop it up, but serious modelers will toss this away. If you want to build a P-61A with the nose off, your best choice is to build a base and glue the model down.

Other parts options are provided for the subtle differences between the A and B. The cannon bay door should be glued closed for the B. The landing gear doors should be cut according to the instructions to build the B. Holes are also provided in the wings for the B's fuel tanks, with a second row of holes to accommodate the guide wires for the tanks. These holes are way too big for their tabs. I would also recommend not opening the aft holes at all. It would be better to simply trim the wire that runs from the fuel tank to the wing rather than run it through the hole.

Two of the changes to distinguish this plane as an A or B haven't been made into options. The ailerons are molded with trim tabs, but these tabs were only on the A. Further, the nose gear should have a landing light on the B, while the model only gives you the parts to do the P-61A nose gear.

The model begins to show its age when the fuselage and boom halves are glued together. The gaps between the halves are pretty ugly, and they require a good amount of filler to fix. (My kit was boxed in 1991, and I don't expect this problem to have improved in more recent boxings.) The attachment of the landing gear and doors also shows some of the gimmickery of the era. The nose gear locks into place while being allowed to rotate. The main gear and their doors attach to the walls of the booms, so it is impossible to attach the gear (and difficult to attach the doors) after the halves have been glued.

The two engines are very different from each other. The port engine is molded as two banks of cylinders. They look very nice and quite detailed, except that the halves of the mold didn't quite line up. My kit had plenty of flash and misalignment on the halves of the cylinder heads. A panel on the top of this engine cowling can be displayed in the open position to show these parts off. Another access panel behind the cowling shows off some more gratuitous detail, but there is a large gap between this bay and the cowl flaps, so I can't recommend opening it. The starboard engine, while still detailed, gives only the fronts of the cylinders.

Aligning the wings, fuselage, booms, and tailplane is a little tricky. I began by gluing the booms to the wings. These joints are fairly large and will require a good amount



of both glue and filler. Narrow sanding sticks will be useful in smoothing these joints. The next step was gluing the tailplane to one of the booms. I checked to ensure a 90-degree angle at the joint. From there, I started to test fit the wings into the fuselage and ended up gluing the two wings and the unglued end of the tailplane at the same time. Only then was I truly able to appreciate the ugly and hard-to-reach gaps that connected the fuselage to the wings and the tailplane to the booms.

Monogram was nice enough to mold the flaps as separate pieces. Still, most builders will opt to cut the

tabs off the flaps and glue them in the “up” position, because most photos of the P-61 show the airplane with the flaps up. I didn’t care for the way the tabs were molded, because the flaps are designed to sit in their slots at a sixty-degree angle to the model. This angle of deflection looks too extreme. I ended up cutting the tabs short and sanding them so they would fit in at approximately 45 degrees. The flaps had a little bit of give to the angle I set them at after the modifications, so I needed to eyeball their exact position as I super-glued them in place after finishing the model.

Another feature of Monogram kits from this period was figures and other parts to build your model as part of a diorama. The P-61 gives you three crew figures and a metal drum for one of the figures to stand on. The figures look okay, but the drum has a nasty depression along the top and bottom seams. Still, these parts can give your finished model a dynamic appearance, especially with all the access panels pulled off.

The model stumbles when you get to the clear parts tree. The sprues attach to the glass instead of the frames on a lot of parts, and the blemished spots need to be polished. The fit of the clear parts is also disappointing. The rear enclosure needs to be sanded to snuggle down into place because of a “step” in the edge of the glass. There is also a top panel that sits in the open position on the forward canopy. The piece is held in place by a chunky-looking tab on the forward canopy.

Monogram’s decals are a bit thick, but still usable. One decal option is for a P-61A, “Husslin’ Hussy.” This airplane can be built in either the olive drab or the gloss black schemes. The other option is for Major Carroll Smith’s “Time’s A Wastin’,” in which he scored five kills. After looking up the serial number, I believe this aircraft is an early P-61B without the top turret (the instructions do show the turret.) The drawback to the sheet is a lack of real walkways. Monogram gives you a block of red

from which you're expected to cut red stripes. All four insignia are the same size, which I believe to be incorrect. I ended up using only a few decals from the kit's sheet: decals for the cockpit stenciling and the (out-of-register) prop insignias.

For the rest of the decals, I turned to Superscale sheets 48-42 and 48-648. The first sheet gives you five airplanes: Skippy, Lady in the Dark, Anonymous III, Jukin' Judy, and Moonhappy. The second sheet gives you Midnight Madness and Skippy / Nocturnal Nightmare, plus all of the stenciling for the P-61. Both sheets include the



walkways, but these decals are best applied after being cut into segments. I built my plane as "Lady in the Dark" and made use of the stenciling on the latter sheet. The decals on 48-648 are very thin and go on nicely. They're a bit thicker on 48-42, but still much better than Monogram's decals. The biggest problems with 48-42 are the two insignia badges given for the 548th Night Fighter Squadron. Neither of them does a good job of representing the black cat on the real badge, and one of the cats is misprinted in white ink. I used almost all of the red stenciling from 48-648, but I used the kit's prop insignia because the Superscale insignia are given as two decals that have to be placed one over the other.

Overall, Monogram's P-61 Black Widow is a solid kit and a classic that withstands the test of time. The molds are not as crisp as they once were, so some patience will be needed. The model is still chock-full of crisp detail, and it succeeds at looking "busy." With some work, the Monogram P-61 can be the basis for a super-detailed "Widow." Retailing at sixteen dollars (and available for much cheaper, should you find one at a swap meet or on eBay,) it makes for an economical alternative to the upcoming AMTech kit. Recommended.